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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KISL SW

SUBJECT: SWEDISH SOCIAL DEMOCRATS REIN IN MALMO MAYOR'S PERCEIVED ANTI-SEMITISM

REF: A. 2009 STOCKHOLM 784

¶B. 2009 STOCKHOLM 787

¶C. 2008 STOCKHOLM 849

Classified By: DCM Robert Silverman, 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Following several attacks on the Jewish community in the Swedish city Malmo, comments by Mayor Ilmar Reepalu, a leading Social Democrat, caused a ruckus in national and international media. Reepalu reportedly blamed the anti-Semitic harassment on Malmo's Jews themselves, because they did not take a clear stand against Israel's incursion into Gaza last winter. We raised the issue with a key advisor to Social Democrat leader Mona Sahlin, and she spoke out February 25, telling reporters that Reepalu's remarks were "unfortunate" and that she had asked him to open a dialogue with Jewish leaders. Comment: The Social Democrats, in a tight race for this September's parliamentary elections, do not need to alienate the general Swedish electorate by being seen as tarnishing Sweden's image as a place of tolerance welcome to all. Sahlin's public reprimand of Reepalu is intended to underline that point to her countrymen. End Summary.

¶12. (U) The Swedish regional paper Skanska Dagbladet ran a series of articles on anti-Semitism in January, in which Social Democrat Party (SDP) Mayor of Malmo Ilmar Reepalu was quoted as saying he opposed all forms of extremism, from Zionism to anti-Semitism. He reportedly also said Malmo's Jews bore part of the responsibility for attacks against their community because they failed to criticize strongly Israeli actions in Gaza last winter. Reepalu subsequently claimed he was deliberately misquoted. However, in a February 21 article in the UK's Sunday Telegraph, Reepalu reportedly stated, "There have been no attacks on Jews, and if Jews here want to move to Israel, that is of no concern to Malmo." In three recent editorials, national daily Svenska Dagbladet strongly criticized Mayor Reepalu for his statements.

¶13. (C) DCM hosted a February 24 meeting for Leif Pagrotsky, a former Minister under SDP-led governments from 1996-2006 and a key advisor to SDP leader Mona Sahlin, to meet with the Ambassador. We suggested that the Social Democrats had a Reepalu problem. Pagrotsky, a leader in Stockholm's Jewish community, replied Reepalu is no anti-Semite. Rather, he is a man who faces a very difficult situation running Malmo, where fully 50% of the city population of 280,000 is comprised of recently-arrived immigrants, half of whom are Muslim (Ref B). Given the difficulties of integration and the overall economic slump of the past two years, Reepalu is faced with growing numbers of unemployed, restive young Muslim males (Note: Refs A and C report unemployment rates of more than 60% in the Malmo suburb of Rosengard, where several violent incidents occurred in 2009). Pagrotsky stated that Reepalu's comments to the media had to be seen, in part, as an effort to keep inter-communal tensions from bubbling over even more -- but he also noted the need for a corrective public stance.

¶4. (U) The next day, February 25, SDP leader Mona Sahlin weighed in. "There have been many examples of discrimination and attacks against Jews, not least in Malmo. The Jews deserve strong support and also one must never mix up the debate about anti-Semitism and Zionism," Sahlin told journalists. "There are a number of unfortunate comments from Ilmar that came to be interpreted in that way," Sahlin commented, adding that she knows the popular SDP politician well enough to know that it was not what he meant. "Ilmar is no anti-Semite but is someone who fights racism, and he also is against the attacks sustained by Jews in Malmo. I have asked him to open a proper dialogue with the Jewish community in Malmo in order to work things out," said Sahlin.

¶5. (U) Also on February 25, Reepalu invited two Jewish community leaders in Malmo to a meeting. Afterward, both parties said they were pleased with the outcome. "I think Reepalu gained a better understanding for the threats and harassment we are subjected to," said one Jewish community leader. For his part, Reepalu told newsmen that the suggestion he is anti-Semitic "is completely absurd." He indicated further that some sort of ongoing dialogue would commence.

BARZUN